Susan E. Reid

American Art in Moscow 1959 and the Cold War Politics of the Public

In summer 1959, an exhibition of 72 works of twentieth-century American painting and sculpture by 69 US artists, ranging from realism to surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, was shown to a mass Soviet public in Moscow.[1] The art exhibition was part of the American National Exhibition in Moscow (ANEM), a vast display of American technological and cultural achievements, coordinated by the United States Information Agency (USIA), which propagandized the American way of life, consumerism, and the ideology of individualism and freedom.[2]

The promotion of American art abroad in the postwar period has been widely recounted as part of the story of the global "triumph of American painting" and the Cold War cultural offensive, as well as of the contradictions of 1950s US domestic politics.[3] Large claims have also been made for the irreversible impact of ANEM, ascribed an inflated role in preparing the demise of the Soviet Union and "winning" the Cold War for America. Notably, thanks to the "consumer goods race" or Nylon War it unleashed, according to Victoria de Grazia, "By the end of the 1950s, it was clear that the United States had won hands-down on the scorecard of standard of living."[4] ANEM's American

---

[1] Marilyn S. Kushner, "Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959: Domestic Politics and Cultural Diplomacy," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 6-26; Gretchen Simms, "The 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow and the Soviet artistic reaction to the abstract art," MA Dissertation, University of Vienna (2007); Lindsay Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

[2] Susan E. Reid, "'Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9 (4), 855-904; Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1997), chaps. 6–7; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), esp. 16–20, and chap. 7; Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 243–60; Rosa Magnusdottir, "'Be Careful in America, Premier Khrushchev!' Soviet Perceptions of Peaceful Coexistence with the United States in 1959," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47, 1–2 (2006): 109–30; David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 2; Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 133–35; Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 94; Amanda Aucoin, "Deconstructing the American Way of Life: Soviet Responses to Cultural Exchange and American Information Activity during the Khrushchev Years" (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 2001); Ellen Mickiewicz, **"**Efficacy and Evidence: Evaluating U.S. Goals at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, Issue 4 (2011): 138-171; David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008).

[3] Francis Frascina, ed. *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

[4] Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through 20th-Century Europe*

art section has also been ascribed a transformative role. According to respected New York art critic Emily Genauer, the art was one of the most popular aspects of the entire show and some 20,000 to 30,000 people waited in line each day to view it.[5] Decades later, Russian writer Vasilii Aksenov told one US official that the art show was one of the "most important events in the opening up of the Soviet Union which began in the fifties and culminated in the change to the current Commonwealth of Independent States."[6] In a recent essay, Lola Kantor-Kazowsky proposes that, "the exposure to the works of Pollock, Rothko and Motherwell at the American National Exhibition and abstract expressionism's growing popularity in the world came like an explosion."[7] The American art exhibition has been hailed as a Cold War triumph, not only for American painting but also for the American ideology of freedom and democracy: an important catalyst, if not *the* prime cause, which single-handedly broke the monopoly of the official art of Socialist Realism and engendered an alternative, "nonconformist" contemporary art scene in the USSR, which one participant has called "contemporary Western art on Russian soil".[8]

This essay focuses on the Soviet reception of the American art exhibition and on the immediate impact on the Soviet public, or rather, as I shall argue, *publics* plural. I shall first introduce the American Exhibition in Moscow in general, and the art exhibition in particular. I will then turn to ways the Soviet authorities sought to mediate and shape how the Soviet public received the American art, before analysing the largely hostile popular responses recorded in comments books and witness accounts. Finally, the essay turns to the American efforts to educate the Soviet viewer in contemporary American art and its underpinning values, and to create an enclave of "freedom" for a select public.

(Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005), 456; Hixson, *Parting*.

5 Emily Genauer, "Moscow's Verdict on US Art," *New York Herald Tribune* (European edition), (14 Aug. 1959): 6; Kushner, "Exhibiting," 18.

6 Kushner, "Exhibiting," 19, referring to personal communication from Wallace W. Littell, 12 Nov. 1992.

7 Lola Kantor-Kazowsky, "The Moscow Underground Art Scene in an International Perspective," in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski, eds, *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 32 of 31-44; Jane Sharp, "Abstract Expressionism as a Model of 'Contemporary Art in the Soviet Union," in Joan Marter, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: the International Context* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 84-87 of 82-96.

8 A. Zhigalov, "Izmeneniia v khudozhestvennom soznanii na neofitsial'noi stene 1970-kh godov," in N.M. Zorkaia, ed., *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn' Rossii 1970-kh godov kak sistemnoe tseloe,* (Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteiia, 2001), 209. See Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 83–115; Il'ia Kabakov, *60-e–70-e ...: Zapiski o neofitsial'noi zhizni v Moskve* (Vienna, 1999); Ernst Neizvestnyi, *Govorit Neizvestnyi,* (Frankfurt am Main: Possev-Verlag, 1984); Iurii Gerchuk, "Iskusstvo 'ottepeli'. 1954-1964," *Voprosy iskusstvoznaniia* 8, no. 1 (1996): 79; L. P. Talochkin and I. G. Alpatova, eds, *Drugoe iskusstvo: Moskva, 1956–76* (Moscow: Moskovskaia kollektsiia, 1991), 2 vols; Vladimir Slepian, "The Young vs. the Old," *Problems of Communism*, May-June 1962: 56-7.

While claims that the 1959 American art exhibition single-handedly produced an alternative art scene, have been overstated, I propose that it did indeed play a role in separating out and consolidating a distinct public of experimental artists and sympathetic, informed viewers.

A caveat and some contextualization are necessary, before we proceed. Contrary to the exaggerated image of the explosive novelty of the American art exhibition, it was one of a *succession* of major artistic encounters in the mid-1950s, which *cumulatively* introduced Soviet artists and interested viewers to a wide range of 20th century art from around the world. Together, these events broadened their artistic horizons beyond the narrow, dogmatic conception of Socialist Realism under Stalin, ending the cultural isolation that had been at its deepest in the postwar years, and becoming occasions for debate and for the formation of an alternative artistic community.[9] The broader context was that of destalinization and cultural "Thaw," which saw a spectrum of positions emerge concerning the legacy of the past and the desirable extent of reform, modernization, and internationalization. As former "enemies of the people" were rehabilitated, museums tentatively exhumed suppressed aspects of Russia's own early twentieth century avant-garde heritage, including early pioneers of abstraction such as Kandinsky, Malevich and Tatlin, long condemned for "formalism". Amongst the transformative international cultural events that had taken place since Stalin's death, highlights included the Picasso exhibition held in Leningrad and Moscow in 1956, which left an indelible impression on a generation; the Sixth Festival of Youth and Students, held in Moscow in 1957, which included an *International Exhibition of Fine and Applied Art*,[10] and *Art of Socialist Countries*, which took place just months before ANEM (26 December 1958 – 22 March 1959) at which lively debate was engendered by expressionist and abstract art from within the socialist Bloc, notably from Poland.[11] The

[9] For detail see: Susan E. Reid, "Modernizing Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw: the Struggle for a 'Contemporary Style' in Soviet Art," in Polly Jones, ed, *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization* (London: Routledge, 2006), 223-44; Susan E. Reid, "Toward a New (Socialist) Realism," in Blakesley and Reid, eds, *Russian Art and the West: A century of dialogue in painting, architecture* [details]; Susan E. Reid, "'(Socialist) Realism Unbound: The Effects of International Encounters on Soviet Art Practice and Discourse in the Khrushchev Thaw," in Bazin, et al, ed. *Art Beyond Borders,* 267-97; Susan E. Reid, "In the Name of the People: The Manège Affair Revisited," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (2005): 673–716.

[10] The *International Exhibition*, held in Gorky Park 30 July to 20 August 1957, presented contemporary tendencies from around the world, including, Italian neo-realists, East German expressionists, surrealism (from Japan), *art informel*, action panting, and geometric abstraction (from Iceland). *Mezhdunarodnaia vystavka izobrazitel'nogo i prikladnogo iskusstva. Katalog* (Moscow: VI Vsemirnyi festival' molodezhi i studentov, 1957); Harry L. Colman, "An American Action Painter Invades Moscow," *Artnews,* no. 12 (1958): 33, 56-57; Gerchuk, "Iskusstvo 'ottepeli'," 27.

[11] Susan E. Reid, "The Exhibition *Art of Socialist Countries,* Moscow 1958-9, and the Contemporary Style of Painting," in S. Reid and D. Crowley, eds, *Style and Socialism: Modernity*

succession of major international art exhibitions had already introduced Soviet artists and lay public, at least in Moscow, to a wide range of international twentieth century art from geometric abstraction, *art informel,* and surrealism to expressive, politically engaged Neo-Realism. Soviet poet Genrikh Sapgir reflected, in regard to the Festival of Youth, "we saw another art [*drugoe iskusstvo*], unlike any we had seen drummed into art schools – and we saw each other."[12] Partly in response to these stimuli, in advance of the American exhibition, artists both within and outside of the official art establishment had already begun to search for new forms of artistic expression and ways to "do it differently".[13] Individuals and groups of artists emerged beyond or on the margins of the institutions of Soviet art, experimenting with varieties of abstraction, surrealism, and expressive deformation. By the end of the Khrushchev period, this would be consolidated as a parallel art world.[14] Thus the groundwork for a sympathetic and informed Soviet engagement with contemporary American art had already been laid by summer 1959. What was new, I propose here, was the way the American guides, building on this situation, worked actively to shape an interpretive community receptive to contemporary art and to frame the American art in terms of the Cold-War rhetoric of freedom.

The American Exhibition in Moscow (ANEM) and the exhibition of Twentieth Century American Art

The American National Exhibition was held in Moscow's Sokol´niki Park from 25 July to 4 September 1959 under a cultural exchange agreement struck the previous year between the USA and USSR.[15] Organized under the auspices of the United States

---

and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe (Oxford: Berg, 2000): 101-32; Reid, "(Socialist) Realism Unbound"; Igor Golomshtok, "Unoffical Art in the Soviet Union," in Alexander Glezer and Igor Golomshtok, *Soviet Art in Exile* (New York: Random House, 1977), 81-106.

[12] Cited by Sharp, "Abstract Expressionism," 84 and n. 3.

[13] Pavel Nikonov, "Nemnogo o sebe," in E. Murina, et al., *Pavel Nikonov,* exh. cat. (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1990), 69.

[14] E.g. the Lianozovo group (Oskar Rabin and others), and the studio of Elii Beliutin. Golomshtok, "Unoffical Art"; Kabakov, *60-e*; Nina Moleva, *Novaia real'nost'. Vystavka rabot studii E. Beliutina* (Moscow: VAAP-Inform, 1990); Sharp, "Abstract Expressionism". The division between official and unofficial art was solidified by the "Manège Affair" in December 1962, at which Nikita Khrushchev attempted to reinstate a party line in art and crush the reformist and more avantgarde experimentation that had developed since 1953. See N. M. Moleva, *Manezh: God 1962* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel´, 1989); Iu. Gerchuk, *Krovoizliianie v MoSKh* (Moscow: NLO, 2008); Reid, "In the Name," 673-716.

[15] U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Record Group 306 (USIA), Entry 1050, Box 7, hereafter: NARA 306/1050/7; "Memorandum of Agreement between U.S.–U.S.S.R. Representatives Pertinent to the Staging of a U.S. Exhibit in Moscow," NARA 306/1050/7; protocol agreement of 10 September 1958 on exchange of exhibitions, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) f. 9518, op. 1, d. 595, l. 131 (correspondence relating to American exhibition, Moscow 1959). The reciprocal Soviet National Exhibition had already opened at New York's Coliseum on 29 June 1959.

Information Agency (USIA),[16] ANEM was conceived as a soft weapon of the Cold War. One of the exhibition's objectives, according to an internal document, was to "increase the knowledge of the Soviet people about the United States so that their conceptions and judgments will be based upon fact and not upon Communist fiction." A key theme to achieve this was: "Freedom of Choice and Expression, and the unimpeded flow of diverse goods and ideas are the sources of American cultural and economic achievements. (Free consumer choice shapes our economy and technology, the free search for truth governs our science and our other intellectual pursuits, and freedom of expression permeates our culture.")[17] "A transplanted slice of the American way of life," emphasizing leisure, consumption, and domesticity, the experience it offered Soviet viewers was a kind of virtual day trip to America in the heart of Moscow. ANEM was expected to stir the hearts and desires of millions of Soviet citizens, to make them covet and clamor for what Americans had, from washing machines to artistic freedom, and thereby to undermine the Soviet project through American soft power and the politics of envy.[18]

Taking place as part of ANEM, the American art exhibition was seen by a mass audience, some of whom had never attended an exhibition of any sort in their lives.[19] Far from all the 2,700,000 Soviet citizens who attended ANEM over its six-week run came with art on their visit agenda, and not all chose to view this section at all. Viewers encountered American art - and especially the sculpture, the larger pieces of which were placed outdoors amongst other displays - in the context of the rest of the exhibition, which included consumer goods, technology for everyday life, automobiles, a fashion show, a "typical American home," where the notorious "kitchen debate" between First Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and Vice-President Richard Nixon took place, and a further three American kitchens. The art exhibition was just one of several dedicated to American culture, including those of records and of books, which were displayed

---

16 President Dwight D. Eisenhower had founded the USIA in 1953 to promote American values and culture abroad. Simms, "1959 American National Exhibition," 39; Hixson, *Parting*; F. Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), 97.

17 "Policy Guidance for the U.S. Exhibit in Moscow in 1959," NARA 306/1050/7. Emphasis in original.

18 Norman K. Winston, "Six Things Mikoyan Envied Most in America," *This Week Magazine,* 29 March 1959; Ralph K. White, "Visitors' Reactions to the American Exhibit in Moscow," USIA Preliminary Report, 28 Sept. 1959, NARA 306/1070/10. For the virtual day-trip theme, see "Puteshestvie v Ameriku za rubl´," *Krokodil*, no. 22 (10 August 1959): 4–5; correspondence concerning the American Exhibition in Sokol´niki, 31 January–23 November 1959, GARF f. 9518, op. 1, d. 594, ll. 221–28. Compare David Riesman, "The Nylon War," in *Abundance for What? And Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 65–77.

19 Ralph K. White, "Soviet Reactions to Our Moscow Exhibit: Voting Machines and Comments Books," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (Winter, 1959–60): 461 of 461–470; Idem, "Visitors' Reactions."

nearby. Other exhibits, along with the exhibition design itself, sought not only to communicate the abstract idea of freedom, but to make viewers *experience* the feeling of freedom and enact freedom of choice.[20] Voting machines allowed them to simulate the democratic process by casting their vote for their favourite section of the exhibition. Democratic freedoms were conflated with freedom of consumer choice: between a selection of records to play in the music exhibit, as well as the redundancy of showing not one but four appliance-saturated American kitchens. As Nixon told Khrushchev in their public debate on ANEM's opening day, the advantage of the free market capitalist system over communism consisted in the fact that women in the USA could choose between models of washing machine performing the same function.[21]

The exhibition of twentieth-century American art was located in four cubicles on the first floor of a 4,000-foot long glass pavilion, which also housed the consumer goods exhibit, and the book and music exhibitions. An illustrated catalogue with Russian texts was published in 400,000 copies, with an introduction by director of the Whitney Museum of American art and member of the selection committee Lloyd Goodrich. This, too, emphasized freedom and authenticity of expression, values that had already been widely attached to the New American Painting in US art criticism.[22]

The design of the exhibition itself and its pavilions were also part of the message, demonstrating American visual communications, advertising and packaging techniques, as well as cutting-edge construction technology, including Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome and a Nylon pavilion. These, along with the culture of display, packaging and advertising, were of interest at a time when the USSR was beginning to develop its own professions of industrial and exhibition designers.[23]

Two displays of visual culture, in addition to the art exhibition, demonstrated new forms of visual communication and played an important role in carrying the overarching messages of the exhibition about American humanity, consumerism, abundance, Fordism, individualism, and freedom. The modes of attention they demanded formed part of the context within which the American Art exhibit was received. First, Charles and Ray Eames' multiscreen film commissioned by the USIA "Glimpses of the USA," 1959

---

[20] Foreign Service Despatch, No. 66, 20 August 1959, NARA 306/1050/7.
[21] May, *Homeward Bound*, 16-17; "Khrushchev-Nixon Debate July 24, 1959," CNN Perspectives series, http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/14/documents/debate; http://www.history.acusd.edu/gen/20th/kitchendebate.html.
[22] Pollock, *Girl*, 350, 345; Simms, "1959 American National Exhibition," 47; Lloyd Goodrich, essay in US version of the catalogue for the exhibition, shown in New York upon its return from Moscow: "Paintings and Sculpture from the American National Exhibition in Moscow" (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1959).
[23] B. Vilenskii, "Amerikanskaia vystavka v Moskve," *DI SSSR,* no. 12 (1959): 9 of 7-10.

(dubbed the "Seven-o-Rama") - a simultaneous projection of short films on seven screens, representing "a day in the life of the United States" - bombarded the viewer with images of American abundance. A Soviet report described it on the eve of the opening. It would show an ordinary day in the life of America, how it works, studies, rests with a voice-over in Russian. "Viewing the films one draws the conclusion that the main aim of their creator is propaganda of the 'American way of life,' to show how 'richly and interestingly' the average American lives. America is a land of abundance – that is the main theme of the films."[24] As described by the Eames Office website, "a modern marvel of technology was being used to show its overseas viewers the humanity of their rivals."[25] The multiscreen film exemplified the increasing importance, in the postwar period, of the idea of information and the use of communications technology and redundant, multisensory bombardment.[26]

The second major exhibit that sought to engage the viewer in new forms of visual attention was Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* photographic exhibition, which had already toured successfully in thirty-three countries. By contrast with Eames' bombardment and use of subliminal messaging, it sought to cultivate a free, democratic visuality in the viewer. As Fred Turner has argued, Steichen conceived his exhibition in the context of contemporary ideas about the development of the "democratic psyche" as a counterweight to the "totalitarian selves and societies or authoritarian personality" posited by Theodor Adorno.[27] Shown in Moscow, it aimed to play a part in the Cold War struggle of the free world against authoritarianism by educating a "democratic" viewer. This effort to restructure the public's vision and psyche subliminally went largely unremarked in the Soviet press.[28]

The art exhibition also sought to shape or reshape the Soviet public, albeit in more conventional ways: through the choice of works and their mediation. Promoting the idea of diversity and freedom of expression in art, it also invited the viewer to exercise freedom of taste, in contrast to the mythical uniformity of Soviet Socialist Realism. Thus it advanced the central message that ANEM as a whole was intended to communicate;

---

[24] Report from G. Zhukov to Central Committee 23.07.59, GARF 9518/1/594, l. 225-27 of 221-28 (Perepiska po voprosy amerikanskoi vystavke v Sokolnikakh, 1959).
[25] Eames Office https://www.eamesoffice.com/the-work/glimpses-of-the-u-s-a-film (verified 13/11/19).
[26] Beatriz Colomina, "Enclosed by Images: The Eameses' Multimedia Architecture," *Grey Room* No. 2 (Winter 2001): 6-29; D. Crowley and J. Pavitt, *Cold War Modern* (London: V&A, 2008).
[27] Fred Turner, "The *Family of Man* and the Politics of Attention in Cold War America," *Public Culture* 24, no. 1 (2012): 72 of 55-84; Eric J. Sandeen, Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).
[28] Vilenskii, "Amerikanskaia vystavka," 9.

the ideal *Amerika* presented to the Soviet public stood for freedom: of expression, and of choice as a consumer, whether between artistic styles or between washing machines.

The American Art exhibition was selected especially for the Moscow fair by a jury chosen early in 1959 with President Eisenhower's approval.[29] The jury's aim was to produce a pluralist cross-section of American art from circa 1920 to 1959, to express the "vitality and the sense of freedom that marks our character."[30] This accorded with ANEM's overarching idea of freedom as a quality of the American spirit.

Accounts of the exhibition have tended to focus on Abstract Expressionism: it included works by Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, William Baziotes, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Arshile Gorky. However, the selection of 72 works by 69 artists was much more heterogeneous, including other forms of abstraction such as Stuart Davis, American surrealism (Ivan Albright, Yves Tanguy, Georgia O'Keefe, and Peter Blume);[31] regionalist work by American Scene painters Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood; and a range of realist work from Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth to social realism, as well as figurative expressionist works that used deformation to expose iniquities of American society, such as Jack Levine's *Welcome Home* (1946). The rhetoric of "freedom" was conveyed as much by the range and diversity of works as, for example, by the expressive, gestural freedom of individual Abstract Expressionist paintings. Lloyd Goodrich declared: "this is the broadest, most balanced representation of recent American painting and sculpture so far shown abroad by our government."[32] It presented an image of America that was ambiguous, acknowledging problems and "unfinished business", but this was integrated into a narrative of candour and freedom of expression.[33] The New York gallerist Edith Halpert was chosen to curate the show for Moscow. Twenty-one of the forty-eight painters selected for Moscow had been represented by her gallery. A Russian Jewish émigré born in Odessa, Halpert had visited the Soviet Union the previous year, and she spoke some Russian.[34] According to Halpert, "The total juxtaposition [of the artworks] emphasized the great variety of expression and in my mind seemed the most effective evidence of the freedom of expression in a democracy."[35]

---

[29] Kushner, "Exhibiting," 7.
[30] Franklin Watkins, "US Art to Moscow," *Art in America* 2, no. 2 (1959): 91; Kushner, "Exhibiting," 8.
[31] For full list see Kushner, "Exhibiting," 23-26.
[32] Goodrich, "Paintings and Sculpture from the American National Exhibition in Moscow," 3. Cited by Simms, "1959 American National Exhibition," 41.
[33] Hixson, *Parting,* on "unfinished business" theme or Rydell? check
[34] Pollock, *Girl*, 344-5 [check pp]
[35] Cited by Pollock, *Girl,* 350.

Fig. Soviet viewers looking at Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral*, 1947

Contradicting this narrative of freedom of expression, however, the selection to represent American art in Moscow was met by US congressional attempts to censor it, as had already been the case with previous attempts to show recent US art abroad in the 1950s.[36] Francis Walter, chair of the House Un-American Activities Committee, announced that, "of the sixty-nine artists, thirty-four had records of communist affiliation. And twenty-two were hard-core communists."[37] He accused Jack Levine, Ben Shahn and Philip Evergood of being communists. Shahn had already been targeted by congressman George Dondero in the McCarthy-era witch-hunt against "communist" artists and writers and was still on the FBI watchlist as a suspected communist in 1959.[38] Levine's *Welcome Home* (1946), an expression of the artist's disgust at military hierarchy, was singled out for criticism. According to Walter, "This art is a weapon to arouse hatred of our free society and people considered representative of it."[39] Other offending works included Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral* [see Fig. /, 1947), which was called "just a meaningless scribble. It is the worst doodle that you could imagine on a telephone pad."[40] The focus of the controversy was on the politics of the individuals rather than on the connotations of a specific style, abstract or realist. Congressional hearings on the art exhibition for Moscow took place on 1 July 1959. At stake was the image of America abroad, and especially on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Defence of the jury's selection was framed in terms of artistic freedom: political censorship was a practice characteristic of the "totalitarian" USSR and did not befit the Land of the Free, the USA. Senator Philip Hart argued: "I believe that it is the Soviet Union which has lost face by attempting political censorship of its artists. We do not want to get ourselves into that situation."[41] President Eisenhower was called on to intervene, but he refrained from taking any action that could be construed as censorship and allowed the exhibition to go ahead as planned by the art experts.[42] As a compromise, however, the exhibition of work from 1920 to 1959 was mitigated by selection of a further 27 paintings from the mid-18th to the early 20th centuries.[43] It was hung in a separate part of ANEM and seems to have received little attention.

---

[36] E.g. *100 American Artists of the Twentieth Century* in 1956. See Porter McCray, "American Tutti-Frutti," *E-flux* Journal #60 (December 2014); Kushner, "Exhibiting," 7 note 4.
[37] Pollock, *Girl*, 347; Kushner, "Exhibiting."
[38] Pollock, *Girl,* 339-40; see Frascina, *Pollock and After*.
[39] Kushner, "Exhibiting," 11.
[40] Wheeler Williams, cited by Kushner, "Exhibiting," 15.
[41] Kushner, "Exhibiting," 12.
[42] Dwight Eisenhower, 1 July 1959, cited in "The Nation, On U.S. Show," *The New York Times*, 5 July 1959, p. 1 section 4 (E); Kushner, "Exhibiting," 15.
[43] For the historical exhibition checklist see Kushner, "Exhibiting," 25-6.

The irony that US congressmen had tried to censor the exhibition was not wasted on Soviet commentators. "The statements of the arch-reactionary congressman show once again the true worth of the fable about freedom of artistic endeavour in the US," TASS reported.[44] However, the main line of attack was against the abstract art. This was framed as elitist and antipopular, ignoring the taste of the people on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

In this regard, too, American authorities provided the Soviets with plentiful grist for their counterpropaganda mill. Although Eisenhower had declined to intervene in or censor the expert jury's selection because the message was to be of American freedom of expression, he did not refrain from expressing his personal views on art. In a confidential conversation with Khrushchev's de facto deputy, presidium member Frol Kozlov (in USA for the opening of the reciprocal USSR National Exhibition in New York, 29 June 1959) at the White House on 1 July 1959, Eisenhower began by establishing common ground between them on the basis of their shared incomprehension and populist rejection of modern art thus using art as a kind of inverted means of cultural diplomacy. According to the secret report on the conversation, Eisenhower told Kozlov: "that those paintings, or at least most of them, represented an extreme form of modernism and that some of them are even unintelligible to the average eye; some of the paintings were satirical or even lampooning." The President went on to accuse the selection committee (whose membership he had approved) of elitist disregard for popular taste, telling Kozlov that:

> the committee that had selected the paintings was apparently not much interested in public taste. The public at large, at least 95 per cent of the [US] population would approve the type of paintings he had seen at the Soviet Exhibit [in New York, i.e. rather than the American ones shown in Moscow]. He said that the committee represented [a] thin stratum of artists, or at least of people who call themselves artists and who believe that they are the ones who interpret America.[45]

Kozlov replied that in the Soviet Union, as in the United States, the public, and even artists themselves, could not understand modern art. He promised to see the paintings in question in Moscow and to inform the President of his reaction to them.[46] Eisenhower replied that, "the opinion of the masses would probably be the same both in the Soviet Union and in the United States, because Mr Kozlov represented the non-artists in the Soviet Union, just as he represented the non-artists' opinion in the United States. So he

---

[44] TASS despatch sent by Allen Dulles's office to Franklin Watkins. Kushner, "Exhibiting,"13.
[45] Department of State Memorandum of Conversation, "Mr Kozlov's Call on the President," 1 July 1959: NARA 84/3313/1.
[46] Ibid.

thought that he knew what Mr Kozlov's reaction would be."[47] They, the leaders, did not comprehend, therefore the people would not either. Kozlov, as Khrushchev's proxy, also accurately represented his boss's views on art, as the First Secretary would subsequently demonstrate when he visited the American Art exhibition, and three years later, when Khrushchev claimed to speak "in the name of the people" by denouncing developments in expressive figuration and abstraction at the notorious "Manège Affair" in December 1962.[48] In regard to artistic taste, the American and Soviet leaders and the two peoples they represented had found common ground, in spite of the Cold War divide and the binary division of the world into capitalism and communism, modernism and Socialist Realism.

The Soviet campaign to shape public reception

The Soviet press, party meetings in workplaces, and agitators who mingled with the crowd at the exhibition and often intervened in discussions with the American guides sought to ensure a correct, critical interpretation of ANEM as a whole, seeking to defuse its dangerous propaganda of "freedomism" and countervail its living-standards offensive. While the press also worked hard to put the American way of life, consumption and living standards in their place, here I focus on the way the art exhibition was mediated in public communications, which established many of the commonplaces of the popular reception as expressed in the visitors' comments books discussed below.

The campaign to shape reception began in advance of the opening of ANEM. The main lines of attack were set in the broadsheet *Izvestiia.* It reported on a further conversation between the US president and Kozlov where Eisenhower allegedly talked about the controversy in American society concerning which pictures to send to Moscow – modernist or realist. Kozlov replied that, in the Soviet Union, modernism had already outlived itself by the beginning of the 1930s. "I would be glad if the same thing would happen here too," replied Eisenhower.[49]

This was significant in two ways. First, it publicly acknowledged that Russia had had its own experiment in modern art and abstraction in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Russian avant-garde had barely been mentioned in public since the early 1930s, or only to be condemned for "formalism". However, some artists and art historians had recently begun to rediscover it and bold curators had secretly shown

[47] Ibid.
[48] Reid, "In the Name," 673-716.
[49] N. Karev, M. Sturua, "Eizenkhauer: vasha vystavka ostavliaet neizgliadimoe vpechateleniie," *Izvestiia,* 1 July 1959, p. 3.

them such work in the storage of museums. As *Izvestiia* reported, Kozlov implied euphemistically that it had outlived its moment and had given way to a new stage of artistic development, Socialist Realism, as if by a natural process.

Second, he rhetorically placed the Soviet Union as culturally "ahead" of the USA in this evolution. In general, the American exhibition was expected to play a positive role in enabling the Soviet Union to achieve its widely proclaimed goal to "catch up and overtake America," a slogan that acknowledged America's economic and technological superiority over the Soviet Union while treating it as a temporary phase.[50] In regard to art, however, the positions were reversed: America's attempts to produce a modern culture were backward, not progressive; it was the USA that needed to play catch-up, while the USSR showed the way. Having experienced abstract art before the Revolution, it had outgrown this phase and progressed to develop the people's art of realism. A senior member of the Soviet art establishment, painter Petr Sokolov-Skalia, in the labour broadsheet *Trud,* contrasted the continual progress of Soviet realist art with the way that abstract art had "remained static since its very inception some 50 years ago." Mentioning Kandinsky and Malevich as fathers of the Russian school of abstract art - artists whose names had been barely spoken in public for decades - he argued that there was no need to return to this superseded stage of development. While criticising the abstract work at the US exhibition, he hailed the works of "progressive" American artists such as Rockwell Kent, whose realist paintings promoted peace and friendship among mankind.[51]

Fig: "Viewers examining a sculpture by Ibram Lassaw [*Galactic Cluster* No. 1, 1953] at the exhibition of American Art, Moscow, 1959. V. Kemenov, *Protiv Abstraktsionizma v sporakh o realizme* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1969)

Public communications made wide use of "judo tactics," using American claims and Americans' own art and culture against themselves.[52] The information that the American right had sought to censor artists and works critical of the US establishment provided useful ammunition in the effort to debunk American claims to be the land of the free. Shortly after the exhibition opened, the literary newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta* informed its intelligentsia readership:

---

[50] "My peregonim Ameriku! Rech´ Predsedatelia Soveta ministrov SSSR N.S. Khrushcheva pri otkrytii vystavki Soedinennykh shtatov Ameriki v Moskve," *Trud*, 25 July 1959.
[51] P. Sokolov Skalia, "Let's Talk About Art," *Trud* (19 August 1959); Piotr Sokolov-Skalia, "Ukhod ot pravdy zhizni," *Rabotnitsa* 8 (1959): 23–34; Kirill Chunikhin, "At Home among Strangers: US Artists, the Soviet Union, and the Myth of Rockwell Kent during the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21 No. 4 (2019): 175-207.
[52] Mikhail Shatrov, "Razmyshleniia na vystavke," *Trud* (31 July 1959), 3.

> We saw the work of those artists the House Committee on Un-American Activities threatened to bring to trial in connection with the exhibition of their works at the exhibition. That is Jack Levine's work *Welcome Home,* a satire on the American military aristocracy; the realist canvas of Philip Evergood, *Street Corner*, 1936, depicting the everyday scene on the street; and Ben Shahn's *Parable* (1958). We found no "sedition" dangerous for the USA in any of these works, nor in any others shown at the exhibition. However, in some of the paintings and sculptures shown there is, in our view, a clear sedition against art. We are shown a piece of tangled wire and assured that this is "*zvezdnyi kust'*" [Ibram Lassaw's, *Galactic Cluster* No. 1, 1953, see Fig.//] and two distorted pieces of iron are called "Sorcerer" [Seymour Lipton, *Sorcerer*, 1957].[53]

Although the controversy back home in USA had concerned critical figurative work such as Levine's, the Soviet press focused its attacks on abstract and semiabstract works. Abstraction presented an easy target, given its reliance on an informed viewer, initiated into the artistic conventions, debates and mode of attention it required. Moreover, it played into the established Cold War binary structure, which aligned modernism with the anti-humanism of capitalism, and realism with rationality, truth, humanism and socialism.

The most widespread strategy to undermine the American art - linked with the narrative that the exhibition ignored the ordinary person and defied their common sense - was mockery: ridicule, caricature, and parody. This was especially the case in regard to the sculpture. The satirical illustrated magazine *Krokodil* reported comments allegedly made by visitors on one of the abstract sculptures:

> What do you think the sculptor intended to express in this figure?
> This is a construction and not a figure!
> Nonsense, this is part of a household utensil, salvaged from a garbage dump!
> No, this is simply the materialized nightmare of a sheet-metal worker afflicted with alcoholic delirium.

"Of course," the author explains, "nobody could guess that this thing is called '*Sorcerer*.'"[54] The same article reported or overheard remarks about Herbert Ferber's sculpture *Once Again* (1954-58):

> What is it?
> A house after a fire.
> No this is a machine!
> Remarkable! Excellent welding!
> This is not welding, this is sculpture.

---

[53] M. Almazov, O. Prudkov, "Pervye vpechatelniia, pervye voprosy," *Literaturnaia gazeta* (28 July 1959).
[54] "A Trip to America for One Ruble," *Krokodil* (10 August 1959): 4-

Sculpture? No, you're joking!
It seems to be a woman.
You should be ashamed of yourself!
What is the sense of it?
Hmm…! You want that too?

Izvestiia published a humorous feuilleton by prominent satirical artist Boris Efimov about sculpture shown at the exhibition. Having commented on the viewer's bewilderment and laughter, Efimov offered his own interpretation, parodying the pretentious language of western art criticism and the way that modern art had broken down the boundary between art and non-art. He commented on the "inspired composition, constructed by the combination of strict dynamic verticals with the volume of lamp-shaped ornaments. The deep psychological treatment of the absolute freedom of his inner 'ego', as expressed in the sculpture *Composition No. 8,* comes close to the strength and vividness of self-expression, organizing the spatial composition in monumental cubist form, with the equilibrium of massive vertical cylinders." Efimov's mock review ended with an "apology" from the artist: two of the items he had mistaken for modern sculpture had turned out to be ordinary items of exhibition equipment – a lighting fixture and a wheelbarrow. What he had thought was a cubist sculpture was merely a waste bin for the used cups by the Pepsi Cola stand.[55]

Fig. N. Khrushchev and A. Mikoian inspecting works by US artists, *Sovetskaia kul'tura,* 5 Sept. 1959

Khrushchev himself went to ANEM three times, the first being the day before the general opening, when the so-called "kitchen debate" took place. On that occasion he was carefully steered away from the art exhibition, but on his final, unscheduled visit on the penultimate day of the exhibition, 3 September, he headed straight for the art exhibition rather than to the *Family of Man* or Disney *Circarama*, as ANEM's director Harold C. McClellan proposed. As Hixson notes, "The Soviet leader's purpose at once became clear. The art exhibit had been the least popular display – with Soviet audiences as well as among the Americans themselves" – and Khrushchev was "anxious to score points against the exhibition's most vulnerable display."[56] His comments echoed and confirmed the main lines of press mediation, similar to Eisenhower's own dismissal and many a reactionary condemnation of modern art in the West, albeit in cruder language. In front of John Marin's seascape (*Movement – Sea and Sky*, 1946) the party leader turned to the

[55] Boris Efimov, "Vyrazitel'noe 'samovyrazhenie.' Vmesto retsenzii na abstraktsionistskuiu skul'pturu na amerikanskoi vystavke v Sokol'nikakh," *Izvestiia* (2 August 1959).
[56] Hixson, *Parting,* 208; White, "Visitors' Reactions"; and NARA RG59, 861.191-MO/8-2859??

crowd and shouted, "it reminds me of a little boy making a puddle on the floor!" [57] The newspaper of the USSR Ministry of Culture *Sovetskaia kul'tura (Soviet Culture)* quoted the First Secretary

> "Let us talk seriously, not like children. For example, let us compare two paintings. The first [Khrushchev points to Eugene Speicher's painting *The Blacksmith* (1935)] represents a realistic form of art. Everyone can see here a man of labour depicted with compassion. The painting evokes a feeling of sympathy toward man."

Khrushchev then pointed to Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral. Sovetskaia kul'tura* reported, "On the canvas enclosed in a frame there are only variegated blots and crooked lines. "'What is the result of this artist's "freedom"?' – asks N.S. Khrushchev with irony in his voice." Inspecting other works of abstract art, he remarked, "Terrible. I thank God for not being grown-up enough to understand such forms of art. Do not be offended, I say what I think."[58] Khrushchev, Mikoian and McClellan then proceeded to the path where contemporary American sculptures were on show. The press report continued, "The Muscovites had long ago given it a fitting name: 'The Path of Laughter'. Stopping in front of the ugly sculpture, deformed by modernism and called 'Standing Woman" [Gaston Lachaise], Khrushchev remarks with irony: "How unhappy must be the woman who gave birth to this sculptor. How ungrateful this man is even towards the woman who gave him life."[59]

Fig. F. Reshetnikov, *Mysteries of Abstraction,* 1958

Khrushchev's philistine and demagogic commentary, printed after the exhibition closed, sought to confirm the distaste and ridicule for modern art and to confirm the populist rejection. As artist Fedor Reshetnikov's 1958 triptych *Mysteries of Abstraction* exemplified (Fig. /), abstract art and its champions were marginalized and delegitimated in ways that recalled Stalin–era denunciations - as well as Nazi Germany's condemnation of modernism as "degenerate art" in the 1930s - by being associated with decadence, madness and infantilism. It was the art of children, donkeys, and the insane. These tropes had been used already in public communication around the exhibition *Art of Socialist Countries* a few months earlier. His comments also foreshadowed his notorious rant at the end of 1962 at the notorious Manege Affair, when faced with Robert Fal'k's *Nude* and by the abstract works of the studio of Elii Beliutin. Like Eisenhower and Kozlov, Khrushchev claimed: "My opinion is the same as that of the

---

[57] "N.S. Khrushchev i A.I. Mikoyan [visit the American National Exhibition in Moscow," *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (5 Sept 1959): 2; ~~translated in USIA archives, NARA.~~
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.; Hixson, *Parting,* 209.

people. I don't understand, and they won't understand."[60] As First Secretary of the Party that represented the people, his judgment was their judgment.

While ridicule and dismissals in terms of aberration were addressed to mass taste, there were also more philosophically sophisticated critiques, addressed to the cultural intelligentsia, students, and others considered more susceptible to persuasion by modern art and, by extension, capitalist ideology. Couched in terms of unmasking fallacies, these addressed the philosophical premises of abstraction and surrealism, continuing the Stalin-era campaigns against formalism. Although such accounts were intended to debunk abstraction, interested readers, used to reading against the grain, could glean from them information and ideas which were not otherwise published, including about Russia's own suppressed early 20th-century avant-garde, as well as the philosophical, epistemological premises of contemporary western art. Thus they fed the appetite of those who were hungry to know more about these aspects of 20th century culture. The illustrations they included of western work also provided a vital resource.[61]

The newspaper *Soviet Culture* printed a detailed article by member of the USSR Academy of Arts, Vladimir Kemenov, two weeks into the exhibition, with a reproduction of Willem de Kooning's painting shown at the exhibition*, Asheville II*, 1949.[62] Kemenov's 1947 essay "Aspects of Two Cultures" had drawn up the binary battle lines of the cultural Cold War, entrenching the existing antithesis between the "socialist" art of realism, as the progressive art of the people, versus modernism, as the art of the imperialist West and its capitalist elites.[63] The binary of realism/abstraction, mapping onto the Cold-War binary division of the world into Two Camps, also underpinned his discussion of the American art shown in Moscow. Kemenov had praise for some realistic paintings: Thomas Hart Benton's, *Boom Town* (1928); John Steuart Curry's, *Wisconsin Landscape* (1938-39); Charles Burchfield's *Promenade* (1928); Edward Hopper's *Lighthouse at Two Lights* (1929); Andrew Wyeth's *Children's Doctor* (1949), and a few

[60] Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2943, op. 2, d. 57, l. 38 (meeting of MOSKh board 4 Dec. 1962, to discus Khrushchev's visit to the exhibition 30 Years of MOSKh, Dec. 1962; E. Nikiforov, "Iz fondov TsKhSD," *Otechestvennye arkhivy*, no. 2 (1993): 39-43; Reid, "In the Name,"674.

[61] V. Kemenov included some illustrations from ANEM e.g. "Viewers examining a sculpture by Ibram Lassaw": V. Kemenov, *Protiv Abstraktsionizma v sporakh o realizme* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1969).

[62] V. Kemenov, "Sovremennoe iskusstvo SShA na vystavke v Sokol'nikakh," *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (11 Aug 1959).

[63] Vladimir Kemenov, "Aspects of Two Cultures," transl. in C. Harrison and P. Wood, eds, *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 647: first published in *VOKS Bulletin* by the USSR Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, Moscow, 1947; V. Sysoev, B. Veimarn, "Protiv kosmopolitizma v iskusstvoznanii," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo,* 5 March 1949; V. Periatenets, "Nulevoi uroven' kritiki. 1940-1950-e gody," *Iskusstvo,* no. 5 (1990): 28.

others. He also mentioned Jack Levine's *Welcome Home* for its criticism of the US class system, but found its artistic value reduced by the use of deformation and grotesque exaggerations. Other realist artists such as Grant Wood (*Pastor Weems' Fable*, 1939), Philip Evergood (*Street Corner,* 1936), John Sloan (*Sixth Ave: Elevated at 3rd Street,* 1928) and Reginald Marsh (Steeplechase Park, 1936) were not represented by their best works. Kemenov's key point was that - contrary to American claims that the art exhibition represented freedom and tolerance of diversity – the "realistic trend [was being] suppressed and weakened". According to Lloyd Goodrich's catalogue text, the harmonious parallel development of all movements, formalist and realist, made contemporary American art "amongst the most diversified in the world."[64] Yet, Kemenov charged, the predominance of abstraction was pushing out realist painters such as Rockwell Kent, making it hard for them to sell or exhibit their work. US reactionary circles promoted abstractionism, he accused, because it distracted the people's attention from the hardship of daily life under the conditions of capitalist reality. But, he warned: "the people will never accept this art which does not respect the people." Soviet viewers "refuse to see any artistic quality in abstract 'painting' and 'sculpture'; their profound contempt for the clowning grimaces of the abstractionists reveals the sense of tremendous spiritual superiority of the people of the new socialist society over the willing and involuntary advocates of modern decadent capitalist 'culture'." Realism was the art of the people on both sides of the Iron Curtain, but just as the people were oppressed under capitalism, so too was their art. Meanwhile, the work of eleven American abstract painters in the show, "overwhelm the viewer by their meaninglessness and the unconstrained confusion of their gaudy colours".[65]

Significantly, for those trying to read this against the grain, Kemenov engaged critically with epistemological arguments put forward in defence of abstraction as corresponding to a modern way of seeing, which allegedly rendered realism outdated, no longer relevant for the 20th century. Kemenov contrasted the Soviet definition of art as a "means of perceiving reality by man," and as "thought in image form" with Goodrich's description, in his catalogue essay, of abstraction as a "refusal to depict reality and images and a turn to the purely objective language of form, color and material."[66]

The critique of the epistemological justifications for abstraction that Goodrich offered - that it corresponded to a contemporary way of knowing the world in the age of space

[64] Kemenov, "Sovremennoe iskusstvo SShA."
[65] Ibid.; A Zamoshkin, "Khudozhniki Ameriki," *Ogonek,* no. 5 (31 Jan 1960): 16.
[66] V.S. Kemenov, "Leninskaia kritika makhizma i krizis sovremennogo burzhuaznogo iskusstva," *Khudozhnik i sovremennost'* (Moscow: Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv SSSR, 1960), first published in *Voprosy filosofii,* no. 5 (1959).

exploration, atomic physics, high speed communications and new technology - were already part of Soviet discourse within the official establishment in advance of the American exhibition, in the context of reformist searches for a new, "contemporary" form of realism, more expressive, stylized [abstracted] and expressive. Conservatives like Kemenov, in the divided cultural establishment of the Soviet Thaw, attacked perceived "threats" to realism from revisionists within the Bloc and among west European Marxists.[67] The art journal *Iskusstvo* (Art) in 1958 denounced debates concerning "contemporaneity," "innovation," and the "means of expression" as a mask behind which revisionists promoted an anti-realist, bourgeois capitalist notion of art.[68]

Kemenov also took Lloyd Goodrich's catalogue essay to task on the subject of American Surrealism. Goodrich described Surrealism in terms of freedom; it was an art liberated "from a too literal dependence on visible actualities, opening up a rich field of subconscious imagery".[69] Citing Dali's definition of Surrealism as "paranoid-critical method… a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on a critical analysis of delirious phenomena," Kemenov accused the surrealists of producing "sickly nightmares rather than artistic images, yet the advocates of surrealism are attempting in vain to prove that these nightmares 'enrich' contemporary art – they degrade and destroy it." Even Peter Blume's *Eternal City,* denouncing Italian Fascism, "remains fundamentally a delirious hallucination in spite of pretentions to political significance (which is part of the demagogic arsenal of surrealism)."[70] Kemenov dismissed the idea that surrealism represented diversity and freedom of the individual. Should "inmates in an insane asylum, each raving in his own way […] be taken as individualists in this tragicomic diversity?" he asked rhetorically. No, "variety here … is merely an illusion, for the basis of such behaviour is always one and the same – loss of the ability to think normally, to have normal emotions, and express one's thoughts and emotions in a normal way. This is why any talk of the creative diversity allegedly inherent in formalistic art is totally unfounded."

The Soviet public: viewers' responses to the American Art exhibition

---

[67] Epitomized, a few years later, by Roger Garaudy, *D'un réalisme sans rivages: Picasso, Saint-John Perse, Kafka* (Paris: Plon, 1963). A book titled *Against Abstractionism* by Andrei K. Lebedev was published by the Academy of Art of the USSR in Moscow 1959; Marietta Shaginian, "Razmyshleniia na amerikanskoi vystavke," *Izvestiia*, 23 August 1959.

[68] V. Skatershchikov, "Krestovyi pokhod revizionistov protiv realizma," *Iskusstvo*, no. 8 (1958): 5-8; A. Gozenpud, "O neverii v cheloveka, o nigilizme i 'filosofii' otchaianiia,'" *Zvezda* (July 1958): 195-214; Reid, "The Exhibition *Art of Socialist Countries,*" 105.

[69] Sharp, "Abstract Expressionism," 85 [cites Kemenov re Goodrich, catalogue. Check Sharp's notes in Marter – notes not included in online preview – for Goodrich ref. and Kemenov]

[70] Kemenov, "Sovremennoe iskusstvo SShA."

Contrary to claims for the American Art exhibition's success made in the US press for audiences back home, the art was one of the least well-received aspects of ANEM as a whole. According to a quantitative analysis, based on the comments books, it received a large number of negative comments. These, along with other Soviet sources and with reports by American exhibition staff and embassy personnel, make clear that the reception of the art was far from overwhelmingly positive.[71] One Foreign Service despatch reported after the first week of the exhibition: "Abstract paintings are a subject of intensive debate and some merriment."[72]

> The art displayed at the Exhibition failed to find a warm response among its many viewers. This was due in part to the inability of the Soviets to identify with it, and in part to the collection itself. Many of us guides were at a loss to give adequate explanations of the works when asked to do so. Such remarks as: "If this is art, then America is crazy;" "This looks like child's play;" "A sure sign of degradation," were among those I heard. [73]

The Moscow city party committee's section for propaganda and agitation received reports on the conduct of viewers and on the interventions of activists. These also indicated a mixed response. The majority of the Soviet public, agitators reported, showed appropriate scepticism towards the American blandishments and took "a sharply negative attitude to the art exhibition," writing pejorative statements in the comments books in the art exhibition such as, "'painting worthy of madmen,' 'savage!,' 'my three-year old daughter draws better,'" and recommendations that the organizers go to the Tret'iakov to find out what real art was.[74] The agitators also reported on their own interventions in discussions and their attempts to undermine the American guides, for example by asking one to name the president of the American academy of arts which the exhibition guide was unable to answer.[75] One agitator reported,

> When I asked what one [picture] meant, the guide answered that if I looked attentively at the lines (in the picture *Cathedral* [Pollock]), I would be able to reproduce it at home on paper. I asked if [the artist] had learnt to draw and asked what the administration was thinking of in bringing abstraction to Moscow. The guide said they were sure that it would eventually win recognition around the world. Those present laughed the guide out of court and said they could guess what was

---

[71] White, "Soviet Reactions".
[72] Foreign Service Despatch 41, 3 Aug. 1959, NARA 306/1050/7.
[73] NARA 306/1043/11. "Answers to Questionnaire." [check]
[74] TsGAM (Central State Archive of Moscow City) formerly TsAOPIM) f. 4 (Mos gor. kom. KPSS otdel propagandy i agitatsii) op. 139, d. 13, l. 7; l. 55: "Vpechatleniia ot poseshcheniia amerikanskoi vystavki, 25.7.59".
[75] TsGAM 4/139/13, l. 11, l. 43: Reports on work of work of communist brigades at ANEM, 26.7.59 and 19.8.59.

depicted. Some expressed insult at having such work brought to Moscow: "what do they take us for?[76]

The comments books are a problematic source for assessing reception: they lack consistent socio-demographic information; they are often clichéd and formulaic, whether rehearsing lines from the press, or writing in the vein of a polite guest; they are also written in a public space, where the writer might fear being watched by agitators; moreover, agitators sought to steer the comments by inserting hostile comments of their own among those of ordinary viewers.[77] The reports of American embassy and exhibition staff, based on anecdote and chance observations and conversations with visitors, are also inevitably partial. Nevertheless, these sources add an essential qualitative dimension to the quantitative data collected by the voting machines and ticket sales.[78]

Visitors' written responses in the comments books were overwhelmingly negative about the art, with only seven favourable out of 42. Many distinguished the art from the rest of ANEM: "We liked your exhibition but your art is nonsense." "The Exhibition is proof of the genius of the American people. I am puzzled at the exhibit of abstract art which humiliates man!" "It really was not worth your while to bring your "sculptures" to Moscow. They arouse laughter and puzzle spectators. Your automobiles are excellent. It is hard to understand how a country that builds such automobiles can show such 'art'. It demeans America."[79]

Russian art historian Mikhail German, in his post-Soviet memoirs, cites responses to the American exhibition as an example of the entrenched "slave mentality," confusion and fear of anything "different or contradictory," with which many people met the more adventurous public culture of the Thaw.[80] Indeed, many comments followed similar lines to those in the press, combining incomprehension with mockery and righteous indignation, and deriding it as a debasement of humanity, as decadence, madness, infantilism, and regression. "Everything I have seen in the art and sculpture section seems like a mentally ill person's view of the world." "Must you forget the national

[76] Ibid, report for 31/07/19, ll. 18-19.
[77] See Reid, "Who Will Beat"; White, "Soviet Reactions."
[78] Translated transcripts of the comments books are held in NARA 306/1043/11. Excerpts were also cited in despatches and in White's report. The original handwritten comments in Russian are held in the private collection of Michael Jelisavcic, who was present at ANEM. With thanks to Alexey Fominykh for sharing these with me.
[79] Comments books, p. 5, NARA306/1043/11
[80] Mikhail German, *Slozhnoe proshedshee* (Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2000), 350.

dignity of your people, of your country, to exhibit this filthy and revolting abstract art?"[81]

In face of the exhibition's condescending assumptions about the Soviet people and its claims to represent an advanced form of civilization, visitors' comments often framed the American art as a superseded stage of development and even regression, just as the press had done. "The American standard of living is very high but the culture is on a low level. However, the Americans pay great attention to styles, kitchens, hair-dos, etc. as if that were all of life." "You are wealthier than we are, but we are a more cultured people. We are not your potential enemies. Our victory will be that of culture and ideals." One woman complained that the colours and forms expressed nothing: "Art must reflect the spirit, but where then is this spirit in your pictures? Emptiness, forgive me! Emptiness! We have already been through this stage."[82] The inclusion of Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and other forms of modernism may have been intended to demonstrate that the New World had now displaced Europe's global cultural leadership.[83] But for many, it was conclusive proof that, in the realm of culture, America had regressed to a state of barbarism and infantilism. In the comments book a man wrote: "Your paintings and sculptures are outrageous … an eight-year-old child who can hold a paintbrush and can differentiate between colours could, with little effort, duplicate your masterpieces." "Human beings differ from animals by the fact that they think in images; however, since there are no images in the paintings of abstract art, they are probably not intelligible to any sound-minded individual." "Your exhibit of abstract art is disgusting. To save the American taxpayer's money I suggest that for the next exhibition you could approach some of the Moscow kindergartens and nurseries and you will not have to ship any canvases only the labels. The result of 'creative art' will be the same and maybe more effective."[84] "The abstract art arouses indignation – it is the fruit of a sick imagination. And its originators should no doubt be treated in psychiatric institutions. And this in civilized modern America!"

Thank goodness, in the Soviet Union, the party had protected civilization from this regression that afflicted the West! "We thank the CPSU for the fact that they have saved us from modernism and abstractionism." Wrote a student, "I believe that art was created and is being created for the purpose of enjoying it and not for the purpose of puzzling over what a painting or a sculpture is supposed to represent. I am very glad for my

[81] Comments books, NARA306/1043/11.
[82] Female signature, original book 3 ,p. 33.
[83] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
[84] Comments books NARA306/1043/11.

country that abstractionism has not developed here." "A look at the exhibition of modern American art has convinced us that in this field we shall not catch up with America, as we shall never get the foolish desire to create anything similar." Thus, the Soviet Union was left carrying the torch of world civilization into the future. Taken together with the exhibition's emphasis on individual consumption and creature comforts, America's "primitive" art provided viewers with a strategy for reclaiming superiority and deflecting the ascription of backwardness back onto the initiators.

Many viewers' comments drew a distinction between the American elite - whose interests abstract art was assumed to represent - and the ordinary working people, whether in USSR or USA. The art represented the former but betrayed the latter; it was not the people's art. "I liked the exhibition as a whole, especially the automobiles. I did not like your abstract art, neither the painting nor the sculpture. Who is it for? Greetings to ordinary, simple citizens of America." "The abstract art insults the best sentiments of simple people." Hostile comments often claimed to represent opinion of the majority of viewers and to speak in the name of the people as a whole as the real arbiters of art. "Our people have realistic taste in art. Do not show us abstract art again. You had better keep it at home and use it on ranches to scare off crows."[85]

Although the position of self-styled "simple people" dominated the comments books, not everyone was happy to be spoken for, however. The last comment above was immediately followed by another: "I did not authorize him to speak for me and my taste. I think the exhibition is excellent and is important for both countries." Likewise, beneath the assertion, "We can say with assurance that here in Russia abstract art will not become widespread. You created it and you can keep it," another admonished: "Don't judge too soon."

While negative views predominated in the comments books, some more favourable and even enthusiastic responses were recorded both by the US staff and by Soviet agitators. Neither group was impartial, but they had different reasons for gathering positive reactions. One US Foreign Service worker reported that a Soviet artist friend had told him that, "he liked some of the works, especially the color work. He admitted to me that socialist realism was monotonous and unprogressive."[86] Party agitators reported that while the majority of viewers comported themselves fittingly, not all responded "correctly". Heated discussions arose in the book display in the glass pavilion and in the picture gallery on the floor above:

---

[85] White, "Soviet Reactions," 466; comments books NARA306/1043/11.
[86] [Author illegible] "Answers to Questionnaire." NARA306/1043/11.

> Unfortunately, sometimes visitors, especially young visitors, come to the help of the guides. Some of them praise the American exhibition, American art, and even the American way of life. A directly anti-Soviet mood even appears. On 29 August one visitor declared that "he was fed up with living in the USSR," and he would like to leave asap.[87]

Another agitator reported: "At the sculpture exhibition, some young Soviet people actively defended abstraction – without success with the public. Our guys actively led discussions with guides in the dome and main pavilion."[88]

Even in the constrained context of the comments books, writing in view of potential snoops, some differences of opinion emerged. One comment writer was pleased that, "side by side with abstract works, there are also pictures in a realistic style. This shows realism has not died in USA… realism was, is, and will always be the fundamental and leading trend in art."[89] Others, however, interpreted this diversity in a manner closer to the American intentions. An architect expressed his gratitude to the organizers for "familiarizing me with the diverse trends in the art of painting in the USA. Among the pictures there are canvases of various trends from realistic to extreme abstractionism." A group of "Leningraders" wrote that the exhibition of American art was interesting, especially the (much reviled) *Standing Woman* of Gaston Lachaise. They added, "We like the exhibition for the spirit of freedom, which we experienced here. A student wrote, "I have truly seen democracy in art."[90]

These comments support Marilyn Kushner's conclusion, in her study of the exhibition, that "the art was seen as a manifestation of a free society, much as was originally intended by USIA."[91] If so, it could be deemed a PR success: message transmitted equalled message received. However, such comments were a tiny minority. The reception was more divided than either US claims for its success or Soviet claims that the people had correctly rejected it acknowledged. Both Soviet and US accounts reveal that we cannot speak of a singular homogeneous "public," but of plural publics. Contrary to the fiction of a unified Soviet people, in whose name Kozlov, Khrushchev, the press, and some viewers claimed to speak, the public was split in its reception of the exhibition. In the absence of consistent data about the audience it is hard to be precise about how this split mapped onto socio-demographic differences, although some pointers emerge from the US accounts, as I shall discuss in the final section. What is

---

[87] TsGAM, 4/139/13, l.55.
[88] TsGAM, 4/139/13, l. l43.
[89] NARA 306/1043/11 p. 11
[90] Original comments books 3, p. 51, and NARA306/1043/11.
[91] Kushner, "Exhibiting," 18.

clear, however, is that the American exhibition staff deliberately separated and targeted a specific minority public, which they cultivated and educated to appreciate modern art.

US mediations: cultivating a select public for "contemporary western art on Russian soil"

Fig. caption: "Guide Alton Donelly explains abstract painting. Friendly discussions often arose about the direction of contemporary American art. The guides made every effort to explain the bold daring of American painters and sculptors who tenaciously strive to experiment with new forms." *Amerika*, no. 41 (1959?), p. 9[92]

While the Soviet media and agitators detailed to the exhibition sought to guarantee that the Soviet public would receive the American exhibition with due contempt, the American organizers joined the battle of mediation. They made significant efforts to shape the public and its reception of the art, and to propagate the chief message about the freedom of art in the USA.

The role of the guides at ANEM as a whole was frequently noted as a success story in Foreign Service reports; these represented the engagement between the young American guides and the majority of Soviet viewers, bar a few disruptive "agitator types," as a friendly and curious encounter that humanized relations between the two camps, and this was confirmed in some visitors' comments which also referenced the fact that they had formerly been wartime allies.[93] The magazine *Amerika,* published by USIA and distributed in USSR as part of the 1958 exchange agreement, noted in a photo-essay commemorating ANEM retrospectively, "Friendly discussions often arose spontaneously about the direction of contemporary American art. The guides made every effort to explain the bold daring of American painters and sculptors who tenaciously strive to experiment with new forms."[94] According to a Soviet press account of Khrushchev's visit, "The guides stationed at the section devoted to contemporary American art had warned the visitors beforehand that, in the US, there is no unanimity of views on abstract art, and that, in America too, it doesn't enjoy wide acceptance. However, American artists, they say, have complete freedom to express their taste and views."[95]

Although criticism of the art was the second most frequent negative comment in the comment books (after lack of exhibitions of technology), the negative response was directed more at the sculpture than at the paintings. The large works of sculpture,

---

[92] "Pokaz poslednikh mod i vystavka iziashchnykh iskusstv," *Amerika* no. 41 (1959), 8-9.
[93] E.g. J. McVickar, "Six Weeks of Ups and Downs in Art," Foreign Service Despatch 107, pp. 3-5, NARA 306/1050/7; White,"Visitor Reactions."
[94] "Pokaz poslednikh mod," 8-9. On *Amerika* magazine: Richmond, *Cultural Exchange,* 148-51.
[95] N.S. Khrushchev i A.I. Mikoian [visit the American National Exhibition in Moscow," *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (5 Sept 1959), p 2. As above – check Russian title

including work by Jose de Rivera, Gaston Lachaise, Alexander Calder, Jacques Lipschitz, William Zorach and others, were shown outdoors in a busy thoroughfare on the "Path of Laughter," where explanations could not be offered. The paintings were shown in a separate space inside the pavilion. Only about half of these were abstract and, according to USIA analyst Ralph White, they were "much more adequately explained".[96] Both the location and the degree to which the art was mediated to the public played a role in the latter's readiness to engage with the art.

A vital factor in facilitating engagement with the unfamiliar art and its precepts was the separation of art viewers from the throng and of art from everyday life, in accordance with the modernist ideology of the autonomy of art as freedom from everyday concerns and the "specially sensitive" viewer it presupposed.[97] The satirical accounts above, about mistaking a common wheelbarrow for art, made humorous capital out of the lack of such segregation. In the first days after the opening, the location of the art exhibition exposed it to a flood of viewers, not all of whom had consciously chosen to spend their precious time at ANEM viewing modern art. The art was shown in the same pavilion as the consumer goods exhibit and, to begin with, the position of the entrance meant that people flowed in on a tide of bodies, rather than choosing to view this exhibit and taking stock that they were in a sanctified space bound by the conventions of art. An embassy staff member, J. McVickar, filed a report with USIA:

> At the beginning, of course, the exhibition had not shaken itself down: the guard rails were not up and the entrance to the art show was located in such a way as to attract the mass of visitors going up the stairs at the front of the main display building. Many, doubtless, followed the crowds and hardly knew what they were jostling and waiting to see. In these initial stages to help control the crowds I sometimes held one of several ropes, which later became unnecessary when things were better arranged.[98]

As Edith Halpert recalled, when the show opened to the public, "in they came in an avalanche, not only those who intended to visit the art exhibition but others who were pushed in forcibly by the crowds. We had the largest captive audience. They couldn't move in or out."[99] A physical rearrangement - relocating guard rails and moving the entrance - helped not only to reduce the flow to a level where more meaningful

[96] White, "Soviet Reactions," 470, 464.
[97] Cf. Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," (1914), reprinted in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (London: Open University, 1982), 67–74; Pierre Bourdieu, "Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception," and Bruce Watson, "On the Nature of Art Publics," *International Social Science Journal* 20, 4 (1968): 588–612 and 667–87; Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public,* trans. Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman (Cambridge: Polity, 1991 [1969]).
[98] McVickar, "Six Weeks."
[99] Pollock, *Girl,* 351.

engagement was possible and to exclude the haphazard footfall of crowds simply funnelling in from the consumer goods display.

McVickar who visited the art show about a dozen times over the six-week period, observed changes in atmosphere there over time. Although the initial crowds were haphazard, they were not hostile. "The first impression I had was of teeming masses of relatively untutored, friendly, curious people who were ready to listen, but just didn't know what to make of abstract art, probably not unlike most Americans would be who had never been exposed to it. Once the press, party meetings and on-site agitators began to have effect, however, the tone became more aggressive: about ten days after opening, that the show had to be closed a couple of times in the middle of the day to protect the pictures. As he observed, making the audience more selective transformed the reception. Soviet viewers began to come to the rescue of the guides and to put the agitators in their place. ~~"When an agitator type would deride the pictures, some equally intense person could be usually seen giving him an argument, not in defense of abstract art or freedom of expression as such, but picking him up on individual points, questioning how 'cultured' was the violence of his attack, or defending the merits of an individual picture."~~ [100] According to McVickar,

> [T]he most interest and the most violent reactions mong the visitors were aroused by the red and angular Stuart Davis [*Combination Concrete*, No. 2, 1958], by the "Passage" of Philip Goston [sic i.e. Guston], by Bloom's [sic, i.e. Peter Blume] *Eternal City*, and by the 'Allegory' of Ben Shaan [i.e. Shahn, *Parable,* 1958] (spellings from the Russian). The simple color study of Mark Rothko (*Old Gold Over White,* 1956) caused much ridicule until it was moved to a safer and less obvious place early in the show. Among the statuary inside the building (exclusive then of the much talked of *Standing Woman*, which was outside), it seemed to me that the simple steel curve on the moving turntable [Jose De Rivera, *Construction No. 47,* 1957] aroused most interest.[101]

McVickar also noted:

> Later on in August things settled down again. The show always seemed heavily crowded, but it was more orderly and there seemed to be more discussion among the visitors. […] It was at this later time, too, that I got into my most interesting discussions. The people, coming in through a less obvious entrance to the exhibit, seemed in general to be a more intellectual and seriously curious sort. They doubted, but would listen and seemed quite receptive to the idea of the essential subjectivity of abstract art and the freedom of the artist and viewer alike to have their own feelings, also to the ideas that strictly intellectual content in art was perhaps not all important, that the painting did not have to 'mean' anything specific and that one

[100] McVickar, "Six Weeks."
[101] Ibid.

> might grow to like it better the more one saw of it. I observed and talked to more than one who came in with definite objections and went away with the troubled look of a man who is simply thinking.[102]

In addition to measures to separate the gallery from the main thoroughfares so that visitors to the consumer goods exhibit did not automatically funnel into the art show, other measures were also taken to separate off and cultivate a select Soviet public for modern art. Edith Halpert was present in the exhibition space for the first days after the opening and answered questions from viewers. She had planned to give gallery talks, but so great were the crowds that this proved impossible. Instead, she instituted "artists' hours" each afternoon from 1.00 to 3.00, during which admission was restricted to artists, academics, architects, and others in related fields. In these closed sessions, "she transformed the exhibition into her own art debate."[103] After her departure, her place was taken by Richard McLanathan (director of the Munson Williams Proctor Institute, Utica, New York), who "expanded on the explanatory features by producing tape recordings in Russian which were played in the galleries and at the outdoor sculpture show as well as by other educational activities."[104] McVickar reported:

> Particularly useful seemed to be the translated lectures Mr Richard McLanathan, the relief director of the show, [gave] during the early afternoons when the exhibit was supposed to be open to artists only. These lectures usually became lively groups where the listeners were pitching in to help the interpreter find the right Russian words and which, after the lecture, would break up into noisy minor debates.[105]

Another US staffer reported on the seriousness with which some of the audience were studying the exhibits: "The art exhibit has been drawing increasing attention from individuals who bring their easels and ask permission to copy various paintings and statuary. Sometimes as many as half a dozen of these reproductive efforts can be observed going on at the same time."[106] In the evenings, artists smuggled in their "illicit, unsanctioned artworks" for Halpert to evaluate.[107] Halpert "saw some of the more modern works and thought they were quite good [...] so much so that she wanted to have an exhibit of what she considered the best of them in the Downtown Gallery in New York. The Ministry of Culture insisted, however, that they have a veto power on what was exhibited and there apparently the matter has ended."[108] After her return home from Moscow, she reported that she was impressed to find that so many young

---

[102] Ibid.
[103] Pollock, *Girl*, 352.
[104] Simms, "1959 American National Exhibition," 48.
[105] McVickar, "Six Weeks."
[106] J. Ramsey in Foreign Service Despatch No. 97 (8 Sept 1959) NARA 306/1050/ 7; Pollock 352.
[107] Pollock, *Girl,* 352.
[108] M. Rothenberg, in Foreign Service Despatch No. 66, 20 August 1959, NARA 306/1050/7.

artists were painting experimentally, many in an abstract manner, and expressed confidence that the show would be "a vital impetus for continuity."[109]

At the closed sessions, Halpert made statements that, in the Cold War context, were politically provocative, given the close identification between art and ideology of the Two Camps. She directly challenged the dogma that in the USSR art belonged to the people: "You in the Soviet Union claim that your art is an art for the people," she said in one of her gallery talks:

> Nonsense! What people, may I ask? Yours is art officially dictated for propaganda. Ours – yes, art in the USA is art for the people. Contemporary American art ~~is purchased by banks, shopping centers, industrialists, churches, temples. It is use in adverting, in commercial brochures, TV pamphlets, medical journals, business offices etc. But what is even more important, it~~ is bought by people in every economic category for the home – from the local firemen to the millionaire. It is part of everyday living, and the choice is of a range so wide that every personal taste can be satisfied."[110]

Not only did Halpert question the premises of "the people's art." The practice of holding special sessions deliberately drove a wedge into the mythical unity of the Soviet people, creating a fractured public.

Who was this select public? It is unclear whether any kind of proof of accreditation as an "artist" was required to gain admittance to the closed sessions. In the USSR, only members of the Artists' Union were considered professional artists. It was a closed shop, admission to which entailed graduation from a Soviet art school, a rigorous vetting process, and agreeing to abide by the principles of Socialist Realism. Others lacking union accreditation were categorized as amateurs or as applied artists of various sorts (e.g. factory artists, treated as lower down the hierarchy). The distinction was significant, not only because only accredited artists had access to commissions, exhibition opportunities, art materials, studios and privileges, but also because only they could legally sell their work and live from it.[111] The definition and identity of "artist" was policed to maintain the status quo. At the same time, it was already being challenged, in the Thaw, by emerging groups of self-styled artists and poets working outside the official institutions, who, although they could not legally sell their work, saw art or poetry as their true vocation. Experimentation took place in this alternative,

---

[109] Pollock, *Girl,* 352.
[110] Ibid. Soviet art reformers in the Thaw also proposed that the commitment to produce "art for the people" should include art the people's homes. Reid, "Art for the Soviet Home," *Human Affairs* 21, no. 4 (2011): 347-366.
[111] In May 1961,"Antiparasite laws," which clamped down on people without registered workplace, made it illegal to work full time as an artist without formal accreditation.

parallel art scene, beyond the bounds of the profession (although it should not be forgotten that the official art world was also fracturing into a spectrum from reformist "left" to neo-Stalinist right at this time). As Halpert's and other US accounts indicate, the "artists" who attended the closed session included members of this alternative art scene. Americans like Halpert, McLanathan and other exhibition and embassy staff, who record visiting alternative artists' studios played a part (along with other foreign visitors) in shaping the alternative art scene as an interested public for Soviet contemporary "nonconformist" art, as critics (and even potential dealers in Halpert's case), and as patrons and buyers of this art.[112] According to Rothenberg:

> There is no question that the art exhibit has had a profound impact on Soviet artists. A great number of Soviet artists have now come during the 1 to 3 o'clock period reserved for them and there is a considerable amount of sympathy displayed for modern art and especially for the right to paint this way. It is also very clear that a great deal of painting in modern styles is in fact done not only in Moscow but in the hinterland. The curator of the art show, Mr McLanathan, has visited the studios of a great many Soviet artists who are experimenting in this fashion. He says that the majority is not too good, that they are groping, hesitant, and unsure. Like the poets encountered by Mr Horwitz [in another report], the modern artists contact each other. Indeed, according to McLanathan, they are even divided into schools. The problem of the guides in the art exhibit is almost always simplified by the fact that it does not take very long before it becomes an argument of Russians against Russians with Americans present often playing the role of consultants.[113]

It seems likely from the contemporary descriptions that, for the purpose of admission to these discussions, the designation "artist" was simply a matter of self-identification. This was significant in itself as important endorsement of such artists and their efforts to challenge the state monopoly on art. The select audience also included other interested intellectuals who were not practicing artists; Halpert also mentions academics, architects, and others in related fields. What is clear is that the American exhibition staff deliberately groomed a select audience and cultivated its sense of difference and

---

[112] ANEM guides also established contact with a group of young Moscow poets and were informed that there were other such groups in Moscow and Leningrad. M. Rothenberg, Foreign Service Despatch No. 97, 8 Sept 1959, NARA 306/1050/7. The alternative artists were already there, practicing as artists, and already formed into groups. Outside of the gallery American diplomatic and exhibition staff, visiting academics and others encouraged these developments, including buying work. Because of the role played by Foreign Service staff in buying such work it became known as "diplomatic" or "dip art". Predating Peter Ludwig's interest in collecting Soviet art (by a wide spectrum of artists, which included the "left wing" of the official establishment), Norton T. Dodge, a US Professor of Economics, made numerous trips to the Soviet Union between 1955 and 1986, to study Soviet economics. Norton Dodge and Alison Hilton, *New Art from the Soviet Union: The Known and the Unknown* (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1977; Norton Dodge and Alla Rosenfeld edited by *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience 1956-1986;* John McPhee, *The Ransom of Russian Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).

[113] M. Rothenberg, Foreign Service Despatch No. 97, 8 Sept 1959, NARA 306/1050/7.

superiority to the "mass". The American efforts created a privileged "in-group." McVickar commented on the closed sessions, "It was at this time that one felt that the exhibit was really a success, even if with a rather limited group."[114] White reported, regarding the Family of Man, that it had moved "just the people we were most anxious to reach: the young and intelligent." [115]

According to McLanathan, "many of the most interested people and many of the 'artists' were actually people with apparently fairly responsible positions in non-artistic fields: technology, industry, journalism."[116] One of the American guides, Joan Barth, gives some insight into the social background of the audience and confirmed that it included members of the gilded youth:

> I'm sure that the undercurrent of dissent from 'socialist realism' is running strong beneath the surface. One young student of cement engineering, who is an amateur painter on the side, said that he "*stoit sovsem za abstraktnoye isskustvo"* [sic: is completely behind abstract art] - as do most youth, according to him. The son of the head of Moscow's transportation system had several books of modern German and French art in his room and abstract painting on his wall – though he was a strong Party Believer. An English-speaking, sophisticated daughter of an ambassador said experimentalism in art is absolutely necessary – even if certain experiments aren't worth much; only history can say what art is truly great. In general, it was the young intellectuals who were most interested in jazz and modern art. In January 1959, I went to the Moscow exhibit of art from the Socialist bloc with 4 architectural students and was amused to see that their reactions to the Polish abstract were much the same as mine; they liked some very much, some not at all.[117]

The aficionados of contemporary art were also not necessarily anti-communist and far from dissident. Barth confirmed the complexity of positions among the audience. They did not simply break down into a communist = antimodernist alignment. "Jazz seemed to be loved by almost everyone I met, believers and skeptics alike. Regarding the former, one friend who was the most convinced Communist I knew was shocked and sorry to hear that the Soviet regime had forbidden us to bring a jazz band to Moscow."[118]

Conclusion

Although limited, this select public constituted a small but potentially influential intelligentsia group of potential "influencers".[119] It was this forum that was expected to

---

[114] McVickar, "Six Weeks."
[115] White, "Visitors' Reactions," 10.
[116] McVickar, "Six Weeks."
[117] Joan Barth, response to questionnaire, NARA306/1043/11.
[118] Ibid. Another guide (name illegible) reported similarly on the audience for American jazz: "Answers to Questionnaire": NARA 306/1043/11.
[119] The main patrons for experimental art were members of the scientific community, e.g. at physics research institutes.

have a lasting effect on Soviet culture and society, building on other important international art events and opportunities for debate since Stalin's death.

The curators thus created a space and time – a miniature enclave within the larger temporary American enclave in Moscow that was ANEM - for open debate over art, where a self-selected audience could experience the "freedom" of art that was central to ANEM's Cold War ideological offensive. Its significance lies not only in the encounter with American art, but in the way that it demarcated and cultivated a distinct, engaged public of initiates interested in contemporary art: an "interpretive community" with a shared set of criteria and language with which to engage with it.[120] It allowed people to self-identify as "artists" rather than following the Soviet accreditation, and it enabled members of this alternative community to find that they were not alone and to recognize and associate with like-minded others. At the same time, the interest the US staff took in the experimental works they were shown also supported the development of this alternative art. The ways the American guides mediated the exhibition and the special "artists' hours" they introduced reinforced this formation of a distinct interpretative community, conscious of its identity as an alternative or *counter*-public differentiated from mass taste. It consolidated the effects of a sequence of encounters during the Thaw as a result of which, as Sapgir put it above, "we saw another art [*drugoe iskusstvo*], and *we saw each other*."[121]

[120] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
[121] Sharp, "Abstract Expressionism," 84 and n. 3. Emphasis added.